DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 693 EC 302 253

AUTHOR McLean, James
TITLE Assuring Best Practices in Communication for Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities.
PUB DATE May 93
NOTE 9p.; In: Kupper, Lisa, Ed. National Symposium on Effective Communication for Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities (2nd, McLean, Virginia, July 10-12, 1992): Topic Papers, Reader's Guide & Videotape. p35-42. See EC 302 252.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Educational Needs; *Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Interpersonal Communication; *Intervention; Knowledge Level; *Severe Disabilities; Social Integration; Teacher Education; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

This keynote address begins with a discussion of the difference between words and action, directed specifically to the practitioner's task of meeting the communication needs of children and youth with severe disabilities. Brief overviews of current perspectives and practices are provided, considering such areas as how communicative acts are defined and understood and the need for inclusionary environments that are rich in communication opportunities for individuals with severe disabilities. Specific problem areas are identified, including: the need for disseminating and implementing the extensive knowledge base on communication practices, the need for improved preservice and inservice training, and the need to match words with action. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED359663

Assuring Best Practices in Communication for Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities

A Keynote Address
by
James McLean, Ph.D.
Bureau of Child Research
University of Kansas

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

This keynote address begins with a discussion of the difference between words and action, remarks directed specifically to the practitioner's task of meeting the communication needs of children and youth with severe disabilities.[1] *Brief overviews of current perspectives and practices are provided and include such critical areas as: how we define and understand communicative acts, and the need for inclusionary environments that are rich in communication opportunities for individuals with severe disabilities. Specific problem areas are identified, including: the need for disseminating and implementing the extensive knowledge base on communication practices, the need for improved preservice and inservice training, and the need to match our stirring words with action.*

My responsibility at the initiation of this Symposium is to identify the critical issues that emerge as we seek to implement best practices for assuring functional communication skills for children and youth with severe disabilities. The "Guidelines for Meeting the Communicative Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities," prepared by the National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities (1992), offer a listing of the "communicative rights" of persons with severe disabilities and discuss, in some detail, the current best treatment practices for helping these individuals attain functional communicative skills. These guidelines reflect a wide array of philosophical and legal bases. Thus, I think it would be appropriate to begin this initial symposium discussion with an appreciation for the societal elements that have brought us together in this commitment.

Where We Are

Our society is dominated by the philosophy of humanism and a commitment to helping *all* individuals achieve their highest potential of productivity. Our commitment to people with disabilities is codified in Federal laws such as Public Law (P.L.) 94-142, P.L. 99-147,

[1] This keynote address was prepared for and presented at the Second National Symposium on Effective Communication for Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities, held July 10-12, 1992 in McLean, Virginia. The Symposium was supported through Grant No. H086B10002, a Cooperative Agreement between Interstate Research Associates, Inc., and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

EC 302353

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

P.L. 104-476, the Part H reauthorization, and, most recently, the Americans with Disabilities Act. Furthermore, our philosophy has produced and promulgated a pervasive set of revisions of the language that is used in discussions specific to persons with disabilities. We are all familiar with this language that, for example, considers people not as "handicapped persons" but, rather, as "persons challenged by disabling conditions." Clearly, as humanists, we embrace such language and have easily adjusted our own attitudes and perspectives to accommodate and appreciate the power of these semantic distinctions. There are few places where the new language is ensconced more strongly and pervasively than in education and politics. In education and politics, the language used in our discussions of children with disabilities (and their families) reflects our values with fidelity and power.

Where We Aren't

Even though our philosophical and political high ground has been most productive in the arenas specific to educational efforts for children and youth with severe disabilities, we should all realize that our deeds do not yet match the promise of our laws or our language. We should all realize, too, that our philosophical holdings and our revised language do not themselves specify how we will attain our values and our educational goals; they primarily set the targets for that process in which we gather and apply our knowledge on behalf of children.

I think the difference between *language* and *action* is a major issue for us here. Our rhetoric is so good, so stirring, so politically correct, so all-encompassing, that I see a real problem in our confusing language with deeds. To my mind, one of the biggest issues we have to fear is that our words are so fearless and that, in many cases, they are a world apart from our actions. I say this because, too often, I see inclusionary school settings that really do not include, parent involvement that intimidates rather than involves, and the teaching of functional communication skills that would never be used or be useful in real world interactions.

I make this initial point, because our two days here will be focused on words, and I want each of you to be sensitive to the difference between words and deeds. I want each of you to evaluate the words that you hear. Are they operationally defined so that they have some base in reality? Are they true to fact? Our language in this domain is noble and consistent. Our rhetoric is sound. However, do our words map a world of real *deeds*? I sub-

This paper appears in L. Küpper (Ed.), *The Second National Symposium on Effective Communication for Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities: Topic papers, reader's guide & videotape*. McLean, VA: Interstate Research Associates.

mit that, at the present time, they do not. As the street saying goes, "If we talk the talk, we had better walk the walk." If we fail our words, let's look to the reasons we do. I am confident that we will see that we don't fail our words because we are insincere or hypocritical. It is simply a fact that our words roll off our tongues and word-processor keyboards much more easily than they translate into educational action. The translation of our words into action demands a rigor, a commitment of resources, and a willingness to totally re-engineer our educational contexts that simply are not adequately reflected in most of the educational settings with which I am familiar.

The Knowledge Base for Designing and Implementing Best Practices in Communication Intervention

Before identifying what seem to me to be the critical best practices in communication, I first would like to review the major knowledge base for these practices.

The current knowledge base to support communication intervention for children with severe disabilities has been gained in empirical research focused on the products and the processes that are made apparent as children acquire communication abilities and eventually arrive at language. It is important to note that our knowledge base has been totally reshaped and greatly expanded in a process that began about 1970. The application of this enriched knowledge base in educational processes, aimed at meeting the communication needs of children and youth with severe disabilities, has been a major focus among speech-language pathologists, special educators, parents, and support personnel for the past 15 years. The symposium papers that you have today all reflect the most current applications of this knowledge base to the specifics of assessing and treating the serious communication problems of children and youth with severe disabilities.

While there is much more work to be done in this domain, one thing is evident: The papers we are discussing here make it clear that the current knowledge base in communication and language provides us with explicit guidelines for designing and implementing communication interventions for children with severe disabilities.

As we begin this quick review of the key aspects of our knowledge, I want to re-emphasize a few points I made earlier. We have a rich and productive knowledge base regarding human communication and how it is acquired by children. This knowledge has allowed us to completely redefine best practices in this domain over the past few years. The practices that we are discussing here were unimaginable 15 years ago. Our knowledge then was inadequate to identify even the practices we will be discussing here, let alone implement them. Basically, then, it is our revised knowledge about human communication and the way it is taught and learned -- not *developed*, but *taught and learned* -- that sets the parameters of sound assessment, appropriate individual goal-setting,

and effective teaching procedures to enhance the abilities of persons with disabilities to communicate their needs and preferences to other people in their various environments. Within the limitations of this paper, I can only sketch out these knowledge bases in broad fashion. The details of this knowledge are easily available, however.

Specific Knowledge Holdings and Their Educational Products

Communication is an act on other people. A major product of linguistic philosophers (Morris, 1946; Searle, 1969) is an appreciation of communicative behaviors as behavioral acts on the user's social milieu of people. Communication is, most basically, a social tool to have effects on other people. After so many years of thinking of communication in terms of its forms and structures and of focusing upon its abstract, macro functions such as expressing ideas and feelings, we now see communication as functioning to allow us to interact appropriately and cooperatively with others. Among other things, our communicative signals act to greet other people, to get others to help us, to stop someone from doing something, to secure some desired object, to answer another's questions, and to get another to attend to something important to us. In short, communication signals act in ways that allow people to have specific and desired effects on the specific conditions in which they live, work, and play. You have seen this perspective represented in all of the papers prepared for this symposium.

This bit of knowledge (unconsidered but a few years ago) is the key to our current definition of *functional communication*. It provides one of the key perspectives for assessing a student's current communicative abilities and for identifying some specifically useful and needed goals for intervention. While this definitional knowledge of communication may be old hat to this audience, I assure you that it is not known by all of the professionals and parents now serving on intervention teams for children and youth with severe disabilities. In fact, I would suggest that most of the communication assessment and goal-setting for children with severe disabilities is currently being carried out on the basis of definitions of communication that are hopelessly abstract and adult-centered. Why else would we be teaching so many seriously challenged children to produce spoken words, name pictures, and identify colors?

Effective communication begins long before language is acquired. This knowledge is old hat to this audience, too, but it is a key bit of knowledge to selecting and implementing goals that will provide an immediate improvement in a child's ability to have effects on his or her life space. Research is clear in its documentation of the fact that many children with severe developmental disabilities who are nonverbal and nonsymbolic still manifest extremely robust communicative repertoires of gestures and vocalizations -- repertoires that, if allowed and responded to by the

people in the children's environments, would allow them to have a wide range of positive effects on those environments.

It is this awareness of the communication abilities that exist among children with severe disabilities, combined with our knowledge of how communication is learned, that directs us to focus not only on the child in our assessment and goal-setting but on the people in the environment as well. When an environment is (a) highly directive and allows few choices, (b) uninviting of communicative acts from the child, and (c) unresponsive to that child's nonverbal signals, that environment and the people in it are targets for intervention, every bit as much as the child is a target for intervention.

Knowledge and perspective about various environments are crucial to a communication team. For example, they alert a team to whether or not an environment is truly inclusionary. An environment that does not invite and respond to a child's extant communications repertoire is not inclusionary. As a result, our knowledge and perspective about the ways in which communication skills are acquired require best practices that engineer an environment so that any level of natural or augmented communicative output can be made to function effectively.

Communication and language are learned in the context of their usage with others. This knowledge was initially the product of researchers observing the acquisition of communication and language among children who did not have disabilities. Currently, it is one of the most rapidly developing databases among researchers working with children and youth with disabilities. Basically, this knowledge tells us that, because communicative behavior is an act on other people, it is best learned in contexts where it is used to have effects on others. Thus, these data show that communication is best acquired in actual interaction with others: asking for help, noting events and objects, asking for more, and saying "no, thank you." The interactions used in this teaching involve doing everyday things such as putting things together, learning self-help skills, or working on a specific curricular module.

This perspective is the key to involving everyone in the child's environment in his or her communication learning. It is this knowledge that promotes the co-occurrence of communication and purposeful interaction. It is this knowledge that demands the participation of all of the significant others in the child's world. It explains to teachers why they and their classrooms are critical milieus for communication training. It explains to parents why one-on-one therapy with a speech-language pathologist in a clinic room may be reduced in a child's intervention program.

Issues Surrounding the Current Status of Best Practices in the Communication Domain

All of my observations and experience tell me that when communication assessment and treatment designs fall short of our ideals, it means that the

people involved in the program team have not fully applied the rich knowledge base we have about human communication. As I look for issues surrounding our lack of implementation of this knowledge, I find myself reacting strongly to three of the most obvious deterrents to the full implementation of current best practices.

1. There is a perception that "values-based" educational goals are compromised or distorted by a commitment to identify educational goals that are based on academic substance. A careful examination of the details of our knowledge base regarding the teaching and learning of human communicative behavior, however, reveals that our knowledge base about human communication is fully resonant and supportive of our values-based goals. Our knowledge that communication is an act on other people directs us to an operational definition of functional communication. It also supports the learning of communicative acts in the context of using such skills; thus, it calls for the use of interactive and purposeful, inclusionary educational settings as the context for communication intervention. By clearly demonstrating that the communicative learning process begins with communicative acts in nonverbal forms and moves on through to abstract language, our knowledge is totally supportive of the use of aided and unaided nonverbal communicative modes. By sensitizing us to the fact that communication allows individuals to have effects on the environments in which they live, work, and play, our knowledge clearly emphasizes the inclusion and the civil rights of persons with disabilities within our society.

Thus, it would appear that there is a strong element of "political correctness" in our values-based goal-setting practices which can sometimes foster an anti-academic bias to our educational processes. Ironically, most of our values-based goals can only be attained if goal-setting and treatment procedures follow the specifics of our knowledge about the teaching and learning of communication acts within our culture's child-rearing practices.

2. Our knowledge base is underrepresented among all of those helping professionals, parents, and educational administrators who need it. Many colleges and universities are performing excellently in research and development activities in the domain of severe disabilities. However, it also seems that the majority of our higher education institutions are failing in the task of preparing professionals in speech-language, special education, and related therapies who are competent in applying the communication knowledge that we have been stressing here. In addition, our inservice efforts to compensate for these failures are undermanned and underfunded. If getting knowledge to those professionals and lay people who make our team processes and our teaching efforts responsive to and productive for the needs of children and youth with severe disabilities is important (and obviously it is), then the current levels of resources directed to this task are totally inadequate. To change this

condition, we need massive infusions of monetary and moral incentives that will encourage and allow our universities to meet the educational needs in this domain. Our professional associations, too, must rethink the educational requirements necessary for their respective disciplinary representatives to function appropriately and adequately to meet the needs of children and youth with severe disabilities. Speech-language pathologists must be able to assess individuals in meaningful and functional ways and be able to contribute to setting goals that will truly improve a child's ability to have effects on his or her environment. Teachers must be able to engineer classroom milieus so that children with disabilities have opportunities to learn and to use effective communicative repertoires. Parents must learn to translate their subjectively generated goals into objective goals that can be systematically targeted and engineered in all of a child's environments. Occupational therapists and physical therapists must be able to identify and teach the small motor acts and overall physical and mobility skills that can contribute to children's access to augmentative devices or enable their production of unaided vocal and gestural communicative acts.

Each of these educational and training needs will require a massive effort. We should be aware that, as we continue to accept the status quo in our training efforts, we are enabling the continued neglect of these needs.

3. Current efforts are simply not rigorous enough and reflect a basic underappreciation of the scope of the changes that must be made. In some ways, issues subsumed under this rubric return to my points about the rightness of our values, the effectiveness of our rhetoric, and the design of our educational team processes. Basically, our moral stand is so high, our rhetoric so good, and our team processes so elegant that they make it easy for us to confuse words with deeds. It is relatively easy to underappreciate the rigor and the scope of the changes that need to be made.

If we are to attend to and apply our knowledge base and fully implement the processes we promise, we must alter the total fabric of our educational systems. We must prepare professionals to operate in vastly altered ways, including the sharing of their unique skills and the integration of multiple goals into the activities of the classroom. We must allow some part of our classrooms to be led by student preferences -- something almost heretical to educators who most often focus on tight control of the teaching process. We must alter basic teacher styles so that they will invite and respond to types and levels of communication output that they now would ignore or punish. We must engineer classrooms so that they teach comunicative behavior rather than just language, and so that they leave space in their interactions which invite and wait for communicative input from children with severe disabilities. There are many such changes to be made; as we contemplate only a few of them, I think it is clear that our current efforts reveal that some one or some many have clearly

underappreciated the demands that such changes will require.

We must all be fully aware that current best practices in communication demand not just that children with disabilities learn and change, but that *we and our environments* change. Thus, we need to stress more that implementing best practices in meeting the communicative needs of children and youth with severe disabilities is a major and demanding job that we take on fully and with rigor. In this regard, we need to begin to assert ourselves more and insist that the commitment from the political system, the educational system, and the consumer constituency be made more evident. I think it is clear that the lack of adequate political and educational commitment and, thus, a lack of the resources needed to do the job are the major factors in the gap between our rhetoric and our deeds.

What we need in the way of resources is clear from the history of special education. We need financial facilitation and better university responsiveness to provide us with the more and better personnel we need. We also need a renewed commitment to research and demonstrations in this important educational domain. Most of all, as I have said earlier, we need a renewed awareness that, as long as we try to do this massive task with inadequate resources, we are enabling the maintenance of the status quo. Neither we, nor our students with severe disabilities, will catch the dream if the status quo is maintained.

So, as we spend the next two days analyzing and appreciating our values, our knowledge, and our ongoing processes to assure appropriate attention to the communication needs of persons with severe disabilities, it might be good for everyone if we admitted that we have far to go in implementing our words and our knowledge. At the same time, however, we can be assured that the means are there, if we will but seek them out and apply them rigorously.

I can only hope that you will accept these remarks as support of our mission here and in the future. I hope that, in our deliberations in the next two days, you will be thinking ahead to what we each can do to get this rich lode of substance and knowledge provided by the authors of our symposium papers into place and functioning in our educational institutions. It's a wonderful job, and it is ours to do.

References

National Joint Committee for Meeting the Communicative Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities. (1992). Guidelines for meeting the communication needs of persons with severe disabilities. *Asha, 34* (March, Supp. 7), 1-8. (This article is reprinted in its entirety in Appendix A of this volume.)

Morris, C. (1946). *Signs, language and behavior.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language.* London: Cambridge University Press.